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Forest Restoration and Hazardous Fuels Reduction Efforts in the Forests of Oregon and Washington

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Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) activities for forest restoration and hazardous fuels reduction on the public lands in the states of Oregon and Washington. Although rangelands comprise much of the land administered by the BLM, we also manage substantial forest resources on the public lands. The BLM manages 69 million acres of forests and woodlands in 11 western states.

The President's Healthy Forests Initiative and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act have provided the BLM with additional tools to ensure sound forest management practices and to implement hazardous fuels reduction projects; stewardship contracting authority has allowed for the productive use of forest products that are the by-product of restoration treatments.

Since 2001, the BLM has applied nearly 674,000 acres of hazardous fuels reduction treatments to woodlands, rangelands, and forests on the public lands in Oregon and Washington, using the tools of prescribed burns, chemical, and mechanical fuels treatments.

Of the 69 million acres of forests and woodlands that BLM manages, more than 3.5 million acres are located in the states of Oregon and Washington. In these states, the BLM manages forests and woodlands through two distinct programs:

Western Oregon: Our western Oregon districts manage about 2.5 million acres that contain some of the most productive forest lands in the world. Of these, about 2.1 million acres are the "O&C" lands designated by Congress in the "Revested Oregon and California Railroad and Reconveyed Coos Bay Wagon Road Grant Lands Act of 1937". The remaining 400,000 acres are public domain forest lands and are managed under the principles of multiple use as directed by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA).

Eastern Oregon and Washington State: In eastern Oregon and Washington, the BLM manages about 223,000 acres of commercial forests (ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine, and Douglas-fir) and 815,000 acres of woodlands (predominantly western juniper). The public domain forests and woodlands are managed for multiple use under FLPMA.

Thinning as a Tool in Hazardous Fuels Reduction, Forest Restoration, and Accelerated Growth

Mr. Chairman, we appreciate your interest in pursuing an aggressive, new focus on sustainable forest management and your concerns about thinning in Oregon's Federal forests. Based on my experience as a professional forester, I recognize the importance of thinning as a tool in restoring forest ecosystems, particularly in the wildland urban interface (WUI).

The BLM in Oregon and Washington uses a variety of silvicultural treatments, including thinning of dense stands of trees, to achieve interrelated objectives:

- to reduce the risk of wildfire;
- to restore forest health and reduce the risk of insect and disease epidemics; and
- to accelerate development of a structurally complex forest, in areas identified for management as habitat for old growth related species including the Northern spotted owl; and
- to accelerate growth for attainment of sustained yield and allowable sale quantity objectives.

Reducing the risk of wildfire

Since the inception of the National Fire Plan in 2001, the BLM's hazardous fuels reduction and forest rehabilitation activities have been guided by the National Fire Plan's goals. These goals include: to reduce fuels (combustible forest materials) in forests and rangelands at risk, especially near communities; to rehabilitate and restore fire-damaged ecosystems; and to work with local residents to reduce fire risk and improve fire protection.

The National Fire Plan is being successfully implemented under the leadership of an interagency and intergovernmental group of local, state, and Federal agencies (including the BLM) working cooperatively to reduce wildfire risk and restore fire-adapted ecosystems. In Oregon and Washington states, the emphasis for hazardous fuel treatments (which may include a thinning component) is in areas east of the Cascade Mountain Range and in southwestern Oregon where concentrations of hazardous fuels are greatest and there is a high percent of WUI adjacent to federally managed land. With a focus in these areas, since 2001, the BLM has applied nearly 674,000 acres of hazardous fuels reduction treatments to woodlands, rangelands, and forests on the public lands in Oregon and Washington. Roughly 48 percent of the acres treated in OR/WA between 2003 and 2007 moved to a better condition class.

Restoring Forest Health

Thinning is used in forest restoration projects to reduce tree stocking levels and fuel loading of overstocked stands. A goal of forest restoration is increased forest resiliency to insect, disease and stand-replacing wildfire. Treatments are designed to leave in place species of trees that are more adapted to the forest ecosystem, including those where periodic ground fire is a normal disturbance. Many treatments in woodland vegetation have an additional benefit of improving watershed conditions, wildlife habitat, and species diversity.

Accelerating Development of Structurally Complex Forests

Since 1994, the BLM has managed the forested lands in western Oregon under the guidance of the Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP). BLM-managed lands (2.5 million acres in Oregon)

comprise ten percent of the NWFP's total area of 24 million acres in Oregon, Washington, and northern California; the non-BLM lands are managed by the U.S. Forest Service. The NWFP established land use allocations, which include Late-Successional Reserve (LSR) [for management as habitat for late-successional and old growth related species including the Northern spotted owl], and Matrix (to be managed for multiple uses including timber harvest). Under the Northwest Forest Plan, BLM's target is 203 million board feet per year of allowable sale quantity and 100 million board feet of non-sustained yield LSR thinning volume pursuant to the settlement agreement in AFRC et al. v. Clarke . Each year the BLM comes closer to achieving the target.

Accelerating growth for sustained yield and allowable sale quantity

BLM uses pre-commercial and commercial thinning to support a sustainable level of timber sale offering for the long term management of the public lands in western Oregon. As in accelerating development for structurally complex ecosystems, thinning for growth enhancement is based on scientific studies carried out in the forests of the west. These studies are the basis for the growth and yield modeling that is used to predict the sustainable levels of harvest for both the NWFP and the current planning effort.

Late-Successional Reserves: Of the 2.5 million acres managed by BLM in the area of the Northwest Forest Plan, approximately 847,000 acres are in LSRs, and are managed exclusively to protect and enhance late-successional and old-growth forest ecosystems. Under the NWFP, no treatments are allowed in stands over 80 years except those that will enhance the development of old growth characteristics.

In LSR stands younger than 80 years of age, we estimate there are approximately 292,000 acres where thinning could be beneficial. Of these, 196,000 acres would involve pre-commercial thinning in stands less than 30 years of age, and 96,000 acres would involve commercial thinning in stands from 30 to 80 years of age. The objective of thinning in these areas is to accelerate the development of late-successional old growth characteristics. The actual thinning treatments are guided by the standards and guidelines contained within the Northwest Forest Plan. Thinning in these areas is accomplished based on scientific peer-reviewed studies that indicate timely treatment can accelerate and enhance the development of old growth characteristics in younger forests. Since 2001, BLM has completed such thinning projects on 46,000 acres in western Oregon, resulting in improved forest conditions and 564 million board feet of timber volume sold.

Mr. Chairman, we are aware of some interest in exploring whether commercial thinning could be relied upon to a greater extent to provide a higher level of sustainable receipts for the O&C counties. A key question for the BLM is whether applying thinning to just a portion of the forest, specifically, trees less than 80 or 120 years old, as a stand-alone silvicultural prescription, could achieve this goal. Unfortunately, the answer is no. To achieve higher levels of sustained yield management, we believe that thinning needs to be part of an overall, integrated, and landscape-wide forest management program.

We estimate there would be a significant decrease in harvest potential if limited to commercial thinning of forest stands less than 80 or 120 years old. Compared to the Northwest Forest Plan's

current allowable sale quantity, harvest on BLM lands in western Oregon would decrease 32 percent in the first decade if limited to commercial thinning on stands less than 80 years old, and would decrease 24 percent in the first decade if limited to commercial thinning on stands less than 120 years old. These effects vary geographically as well, with a much greater impact to the rural counties in southwestern Oregon as compared to our northern districts.

Thinning is one forest management tool that must be used in concert with other silvicultural practices across the entire spectrum of age classes to meet desired resource and socio-economic objectives envisioned in the Northwest Forest Plan and the O&C Act. Thinning alone does not constitute sustainable forestry and, if limited to a portion of the landscape, cannot provide sufficient timber to generate that level of receipts the counties of rural Oregon have historically received.

BLM is revising six western Oregon Resource Management Plans tied to the NWFP. A few weeks ago, BLM released a draft plan analyzing four alternatives for the future management of 2.5 million acres of public lands in Western Oregon. BLM is currently accepting public comments on management options.

Stewardship Contracting and Biomass: By-products of Forest Restoration and Hazardous Fuels Reduction Treatments

Congress authorized the BLM to use stewardship contracts, which are intended to provide economic benefits to local communities, reduce hazardous fuels, and restore forest and rangeland health, in the FY 2003 Omnibus Appropriations Act (Section 323 of Public Law 108-7). The BLM in Oregon and Washington has used this tool, primarily, though not exclusively, in the public domain lands and eastside forests and woodlands, to accomplish forest, woodland, and range restoration projects, and to provide substantial amounts of forest products as a by-product of the restoration treatments. The number of BLM stewardship contracts has increased steadily from 2 contracts in FY 2003 to 30 contracts in FY 2007.

Stewardship contracting projects have become the BLM's best tool for promoting biomass utilization, as they allow for contract lengths of up to 10 years. A few examples include:

- **Klamath Falls:** The 10-year Gerber Stewardship project began in FY 2004 in south central Oregon. When completed, the project will result in the treatment of 10,000 acres, improving forest and woodland health, improving rangeland health, reducing hazardous fuels in the Wildland Urban Interface, improving wildlife and fisheries habitat, and enhancing riparian areas. It is now in its fourth year, with 1,500 acres under contract and resulting in the sale of 750,000 board feet and 15,000 tons of biomass for energy development.

- **Prineville:** Through the execution of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs (Tribes) in January of 2006, the BLM and Forest Service in central Oregon agreed to offer 80,000 bone dry tons (8,000 acres) of woody biomass material annually. This long-term commitment to provide biomass to the mill at Warm Springs will provide a stable supply of biomass to expand the market for biomass energy. With the increased supply of renewable energy, the Tribes can market energy to power homes, or direct that energy to new businesses. Thus, woody debris that used to be

discarded will now be converted to heat, light, and economic development. Based on this MOU, the Tribes are seeking a power purchase agreement and bank financing to develop a 15.5 megawatt cogeneration plant.

- **Lakeview:** The BLM has participated in the Lakeview Biomass Project since its inception in 2005. In November of 2007, the BLM joined its partners in the Lake County Resources Initiative (U.S. Forest Service, Collins Companies, Marubeni Sustainable Energy, Town of Lakeview, City of Paisley and Lake County) in a Memorandum of Understanding for a 20-year supply of woody materials for biomass for energy. We anticipate that treatments in the Lakeview District from western juniper cutting and removal, hazardous fuel reduction, and timber sales will result in the production of 6,000 to 13,000 "bone dry tons" of biomass per year – representing five to ten percent of the total annual supply needed for operation of the proposed facility. The Lakeview District has committed to applying mechanical treatments to approximately 2,000 acres per year, where biomass would be one of the natural resource products generated.

Conclusion

The BLM will continue its efforts to achieve significant improvements in the health and productivity of the public forests and rangelands. We will also continue to work in partnership with other Federal agencies, as well as state, local, and Tribal governments, to accomplish fuels reduction and forest restoration projects, including an active thinning program. We recognize that thinning is one tool in an overall forest management program to provide for sustainable and functional forest ecosystems. We appreciate your continued support of our forest management efforts. I would be glad to answer any questions.