

# Senators grill Bosworth: Use the HFRA authority

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Subcommittee hears praise for DeBaugan, Happy Homemakers

by John Q. Murray

A U.S. Senate subcommittee grilled Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth Wednesday, asking him why the agency was not effectively using its authority under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act to treat fuels and protect communities from catastrophic wildfire.

Sen. Ron Wyden (D-OR) said that under HFRA, the Forest Service has treated only 77,368 acres among 20 million acres identified as needing work. At that rate, the work will take centuries, he said.

Even where it has done the work, the agency has tended to focus on “easy acres,” such as those that can be burned in the Southeast, rather than the more expensive mechanical treatments required in the West.

The agency’s failure to create HFRA projects and provide a reliable supply of timber could jeopardize the local mill infrastructure, the senators pointed out. If mills close due to a lack of supply, fuel reduction projects would immediately become significantly more expensive, they said.

Bosworth contested Wyden’s figures, pointing out that since HFRA was passed in 2003, the agency has met or exceeded its fuel reduction targets each year. The agency has treated 8.5 million acres using all of its authorities, with 5.5 million of those acres in the wildland-urban interface, he said.

The Forest Service doesn’t direct its line officers to use the HFRA authority for projects. They use all authorities available to them, including categorical exclusions, Bosworth said.

He also said the prescribed burns in the Southeast represented 17 percent of the agency’s spending, not 40 percent, as Sen. Wyden suggested.

Sen. Wyden said he was having difficulty “unpacking” the many different statistics and asked for improved reporting from the Forest Service.

“I cannot coherently track all this mumbo-jumbo,” he complained.

Why are there such meager results from HFRA, the senator asked, after Bosworth and Mark Rey previously testified that the Act would allow the Forest Service to do more with less money?

Other witnesses at the hearing cited the learning curve involved in developing effective collaboration, a lack of funding for the Forest Service, lawsuits by environmental groups, and a lack of skills among Forest Service line officers.

During the hearing, just one HFRA project was cited as a success: The “DeBaugan” project, near the towns of DeBorgia and Haugan.

Matthew Koehler, executive director of the WildWest Institute, testified that his group has been intimately involved with two HFRA projects, and offered ideas about why some projects work and others fail.

The Bitterroot National Forest's East Fork projects offered just one collaborative meeting and no field trips, while the Lolo National Forest's DeBaugan project had six collaborative meetings and two field trips.

Unlike other projects that used Forest Service employees as facilitators, the DeBaugan project used an independent outside facilitator, Dr. Jim Burchfield, from the University of Montana's School of Forestry and Conservation.

"Dr. Burchfield has done an excellent job and the outside facilitation has allowed the collaborative group to build trust, rather than fight with a facilitator who might have their own agenda," Koehler said.

Koehler also praised the Superior Ranger District, West End Fire Chief Bruce Charles, and DeBorgia's "Happy Homemakers" group, which provided tasty cookies and brownies for all of the collaborative meetings.

"It's been a refreshing process and I personally believe that Superior District Ranger Rob Harper and his staff deserve a lot of credit," Koehler said.

But even that success has been tempered by a lack of funding, he pointed out. Work on the ground is not scheduled to begin until 2009.

Koehler recommended that Congress fund restoration projects directly without coupling them with logging projects to pay their way.

The subcommittee heard from U.S. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth and Regional Forester Gail Kimbell, Nina Hatfield from the Interior Department, Oregon forest county commissioner Colleen McLeod, Jay Jensen, who heads an organization of Western state foresters, and Rick DeIaco, director of forestry for Ruidoso, N.M., which was ranked among the highest-priority fuels reduction project in the country back in 2000.

DeIaco said Ruidoso remains at extremely high risk from wildfire six years later because the Forest Service officials assigned to the fuels reduction project lack the skills needed to implement a collaborative project.

"I call it the one-third rule," he said. Whenever any large organization is dealing with significant change, one-third of the agency's line officers have the new skills that are required and can maximize the effectiveness of the new tools; one-third can be taught the new skills, and one-third lack the necessary skills and will continue to struggle.

The Forest Service needs effective training for those implementing HFRA, he said.

DeIaco also suggested that the Forest Service is double-counting some acres in coming up with its treatment totals. He said the agency counts the number of acres thinned and then counts the same acres again when the resulting slash piles are burned.

Jensen praised the development of Community Wildfire Protection Plans (CWPP), required under

HFRA, which he said helped each local community prioritize the worst areas and share responsibility for community protection.

McLeod, a forest commissioner from Northeast Oregon, said that her county has completed its own CWPP and that it represents an enormous amount of information. “Powerful knowledge requires equally powerful action,” she said, and encouraged the Forest Service to put that knowledge to work. “Planning without implementation is a wasted process,” she said.

Kimbell cited a successful collaboration regarding the Bonners Ferry watershed in the Idaho Panhandle. The group, which included local and tribal governments, had reached consensus before outsiders bogged down the process.

“Some outside groups from outside the community chose to take issue with the long-ongoing collaborative effort and the consensus decision and have really disrupted the process,” she said.

Sen. Ken Salazar (D-CO) said the increasing numbers of beetle-killed trees is creating an impending catastrophic wildfire that he called “the Katrina of the west.”

Even though Hurricane Katrina was being tracked and everyone knew it was going to slam into the Gulf Coast, the government did not do enough to prepare for the crisis. “In the judgment of all who have reviewed it, it was a rather inept response on the part of the federal government,” he said.

“I see a lot of analogies to problems that we face in the West,” he said. “It seems we simply are not doing enough.”

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