

## *As Prepared for Delivery*

### **What is happening?**

Mr. Speaker/Madam Speaker, I rise today to call the nation's attention to a tragic event unfolding in my state of Oregon-the Bootleg fire.

This horrific fire, now the third largest in my State's history, has consumed some 400,000 acres, (660 square miles), which had been a beautiful landscape of pine and fir timber, sage brush, grass and meadows. The fire has already taken with it millions of board feet of timber, the lives of thousands of forest creatures, cattle by the dozens if not hundreds, horses, fences, buildings, and homes. The fire released hundreds of thousands of tons of carbon, which had been and could have remained sequestered indefinitely. The smoke plume created by this conflagration has reached across this nation, more than 2000 miles, to cloud the air along the east coast, including the air right here in Washington, DC.

Sadly, although the Bootleg fire is the largest fire in the country, it is not the only fire burning in the West. As I speak, there are more than 75 active forest fires across 12 states, which includes specifically 7 fires in Oregon.

I've spoken with people whose homes and ranches were in the path of this fire. It moved so fast that they could not gather and remove their cattle in time to save them. They have been sending me pictures of cattle that died in the fire, and pictures of many others that had to be put down because of injuries they suffered from the flames they could not escape. These are truly some of the saddest photos I have ever seen.

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The fire leaves some without their homes, others with huge financial losses, and many with little or nothing to feed those cattle that were lucky enough to have escaped death in the fire.

We are talking about people whose life's work has been dedicated to caring for the cattle that have now been lost, caring for the land and pastures that have now been destroyed. I can't put into words the pain these ranching families and the communities that they live in are going through. And, these fires continues to burn.

### **How did we get here?**

Fires happen naturally in our Western forests. They have always been a part of the Western landscape. In earlier times, these fires would burn low to the ground, at relatively low temperatures. Underbrush, vegetation, and smaller trees, would burn, and in what were normal times, larger trees would survive.

Then about 100 years ago, the nation decided to put out and suppress these fires. In part, the trees and brush that grew unabated by fire (the "fuel") that built up were reduced by logging activity in our forests.

Then in the 1970s, forests saw the beginning of a steep reduction in forest management, and our Forests began to grow unnaturally dense. Federal regulations decimated the timber industry, leaving more and more trees and brush on our federal lands. The fires, fueled by this huge amount of ever-increasing woody mass, grew in their ferocity and danger.

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And now, after years of fire suppression and woefully inadequate forest management, we are paying the price for decades of bad forest policies.

The horrific infernos we are seeing out West are not the fires of centuries past. These terrifying, out of control wildfires become so immense that they often start burning from the top of the trees, not from the underbrush, leaping from treetop to treetop, causing the fire to travel faster and hotter.

The blame for our forest's deplorable and dangerous condition does not belong to any one person or group. However, I must call out the massive special interest lawsuit industry that profits from the operation of the "Access to Justice Act" by legally knee capping almost every attempt to manage our western forests.

These litigators market themselves as defenders of the environment, but make no mistake—there is big money in this business, and this is not helping the environment. Wildlife are being killed in this fire. Watersheds are being destroyed, trees are burning to a crisp, and the fires are so hot they are sterilizing the soil.

The natural cycle of forests is interrupted, because the only thing that will grow for years into the future on this burned out and baked land will be weeds. (per Jamie Roscoe)

### **Short term relief**

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The people who have lost their livestock and their property need our help. Without this help, many stand to lose what little they have left.

We have spoken with County Commissioners and ranchers who have explained that many have lost the grass and forage their cattle need for the coming summer, fall and winter months. They are calling every hay supplier they know, only to be told that there is no hay or feed left. This shortage of feed in the West is so widespread that ranchers are having to buy it and truck it in from as far East as Missouri.

My office is working with USDA to try and find help for these folks.

### **Long term solution**

We're seeing some early evidence that managed forests fared far better than did forests that have not been thinned or otherwise "treated" in anticipation of these fires. Firefighters on the ground indicated that areas that those had been thinned slowed down fires so that they had a fighting chance to bring the fire in those areas under control.

This is good news, because it means that there is hope. There is a way out of this if Congress finds the political willpower to work toward a solution.

But Forest management will come at a cost. Some estimate that it will take around \$4 billion in Oregon alone to improve our forests so that they are not simply huge fires waiting to happen.

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USDA projects that if nothing changes, 67% of the Forest Service's budget will go toward fire suppression by 2021.

I am pleased to report that I am currently working with Ranking Member Bruce Westerman whose "Resilient Federal Forests Act" will be a huge step toward giving Forest Service the tools it needs to better manage our public lands.

In fact today, I introduced legislation included in that package, the "Commonsense Coordination Act". This bill will cut through some of the red tape that agencies must overcome to complete critical forest management activities.

### **Closing/Sympathy/Thank you**

I want to express my sympathy to the people suffering in the Bootleg fire and in all the fires across the West. My staff and I have been on nonstop calls with local officials, county commissioners, and ranchers. The experiences they are sharing are incredibly sad and made more so by the fact that we can do so much better when it comes to protecting the nations forests and those than live in and around them. I will continue to do all that I can here in Congress to help.

Lastly, I want to thank all of the brave men and women who are out there fighting the fires, including firefighters, farmers and ranchers, helicopter operators, and others. This is hot, dirty, difficult and dangerous work, but their tireless efforts are saving lives, homes, forests, wildlife, livestock, and property. Mr. Speaker/ Madam Speaker, I yield back.