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EAGLE COUNTY

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March 10, 2015

The Honorable Scott Tipton
The Honorable Rob Bishop, Chairman
The Honorable Raul Grijalva, Ranking Member
House Committee on Natural Resources
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Tipton, Chairman Bishop and Ranking Member Grijalva:

It has come to our attention that the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands will soon be considering H.R. 695, the Healthy Forest Management and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2015. We thank you for talking the time to address such an important issue to those living in the Western United States, and we would like to offer the following comments for consideration during hearings on this bill.

The 2012 wildfire season was the most destructive on record for the State of Colorado. Eagle County, and the rest of the state and region, once again find ourselves preparing for a year of severe drought and the inevitable return of fire to the forests in our backyard. It is imperative that federal and state land managers have available every tool at their discretion to reduce the threats posed by catastrophic wildfire to our forests, watersheds, and public health and safety. The Eagle County Commissioners wish to voice their support for any new legislation aimed at providing long-term strategies to manage hazardous fuels associated with the on-going drought and bark beetle epidemic throughout Colorado and the Western United States.

Eagle County's tourism-based economy stands to lose a great deal if people no longer choose to visit our public lands. We understand the importance of maintaining healthy forest and rangeland ecosystems, as they are vital to our long-term economic sustainability. Over the past decade we have forged meaningful partnerships with private timber interests, the tourism industry, the conservation community, utility companies, as well as federal, state and local government, to address the threat catastrophic wildfire poses to our collective well-being. H.B. 818 recognizes the importance of collaborative mitigation efforts across jurisdictional boundaries by giving the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture the freedom to enter into cooperative agreements with state foresters under the Good Neighbor Authority.

The provisions to H.R. 695 that require state and federal agencies to consult with local and tribal leaders regarding the designation of high-risk area ensures a broad base of stakeholder involvement in future mitigation work on public lands. We support the expedited approval process for projects located in close proximity to vital infrastructure, utility corridors, roadways and recreation areas. Eagle County, not unlike most

counties in Colorado, is primarily comprised of lands within the National Forest System and under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management. It is imperative that we move quickly to respond to hazardous fuel accumulations on our public lands. H.R. 695 requires local involvement in the decision-making process and consistency with applicable land management and land use plans. We are confident in the ability of federal, state, and local government to work together on implementing the wide variety of existing plans in place to address wildfire preparedness, mitigation, and response.

We encourage state and federal land managers to work with local government to reduce structural flammability in urban interface areas through building code and land use regulation. The ever-increasing cost of fire suppression can be tied directly to the influx of highly combustible structures built in the urban interface. We must all work together to address this problem so that natural fuel reduction tools like fire use and prescribed fire become more viable options across the landscape. Mechanical fuel reduction alone cannot fix the problem in the long-run. Returning naturally occurring fire to our disturbance dependent ecosystems must occur to sustainably manage our forests.

We appreciate the steps taken in H.R. 695 to provide the long-term stewardship contracting that the timber and fledgling biomass industry so urgently need. A landscape-based approach to fire mitigation and fuels management throughout the state and region will require the infrastructure to harvest and process the timber being removed from our forests. We are cautiously optimistic that the provision to extend stewardship contracting to 20 years will give private industry the ability to assist with more sustainable management of our forests. We encourage the thoughtful use of our natural resources, and the development of alternative and renewable energy. We hope that H.B. 818 moves us closer to finding the balance needed to responsibly manage our forests, while providing for most beneficial use of our public lands.

Thank you and your subcommittee members for the effort taken to address these important issues. We hope this insight proves valuable to you and your colleagues.

Sincerely,
Eagle County Board of Commissioners

Kathy Chandler-Henry
Chair

Jeanne McQueeney
Commissioner

Jill H. Ryan
Commissioner