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US Representative Scott Tipton, CO-3
609 Main Street, Suite 105, Box 11
Alamosa, Colorado 81101
Attn: Brenda Felmlee, SLV Regional Field Rep.

February 26, 2015

Dear Representative Tipton;

I am writing you on behalf of RWEACT in support of the *"Healthy Forest Management Act of 2015"*. RWEACT (Rio Grande Watershed Emergency Action Coordination Team) was established in July 2013 in response to the West Fork Complex Fire (WFCF). The WFCF fire exhibited extreme fire behavior which was the result of the combined 485,000 acres of spruce-beetle infested forest, persistent drought, high winds and low relative humidity. The WFCF consumed approximately 109,000 acres of which 88,000 acres was primarily public lands situated in the Upper Rio Grande watershed, Rio Grande National Forest (RGNF). RWEACT brings together local, state and federal agencies, organizations and individuals which have developed an effective, coordinated approach to addressing fire-caused hazards resulting in the protection of human life, critical infrastructure and the natural health of the Rio Grande watershed and its environment. RWEACT has partnered with the Rio Grande National Forest, Colorado Water Conservation Board and the Counties of Hinsdale, Mineral and Rio Grande and now represents over 70 public/private organizations as partners. RWEACT was originally enabled and funded by Colorado Governor's Orders D 2013-017 and D 2013-022 which declared a "state of emergency" in the above counties. The 88,000 acre burn combined with the spruce-beetle infestation of nearly half a million acres has resulted in a land-scape scale forest/watershed disturbance which accounts for nearly 1/3 of the 1.8 million acre Rio Grande National Forest. Currently, RWEACT is in the process of expanding its mission and function by establishing itself as a 501-c-3 (non-profit) entity to work in collaboration with the RGNF as a

forest collaborative and advocacy organization in future forest stewardship, management and watershed protection.

Along with our support for the Healthy Forest Management Act of 2015, RWEACT offers the following comments regarding the provisions of the ACT. As we understand it, the Healthy Forest Management Act 2015:

1. *Declares the bark beetle epidemic, drought, deteriorating forest health conditions on National Forest System land and lands under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management, with the resulting risk of devastating wildfires, as an imminent threat.*

RWEACT: As mentioned above, all was proven with the WFCF and Colorado front-range wildfires to be the catalyst for fire ignition and the fuel that resulted in extreme fire behavior and the magnitude of the burn scar. This designation is absolutely appropriate and necessary.

2. *Gives governors the authority to designate high-risk areas within the National Forest System and lands under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management. Further, requires that governors consult with county commissioners from affected counties and affected tribes in designating high-risk areas.*

RWEACT: We support this authority designation. It always makes sense to keep authority at the local and state level along with federal agencies as long as it creates realistic expectations and effective results. The "60-day implementation" timeline should include the time it takes for project design, NEPA, agency planning and funding strategies all of which represent the realities of what it takes for a project to become "shovel ready". A 60-day timeline might be somewhat unrealistic

3. *Allows the Secretaries of Interior and Agriculture, working in consultation with governors, county commissioners from affected counties, and affected tribes to designate high-risk areas on lands under their jurisdiction.*
4. *Gives states the authority to provide for the development of proposed emergency hazardous fuels reduction projects for high-risk areas.*
5. *Allows the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to provide for the development of proposed emergency hazardous fuels reduction projects for high-risk areas in consultation with states.*
6. *Applies expedited procedures and authorities under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 to emergency hazardous fuels reduction projects in designated high-risk areas.*

RWEACT: Support for all of numbers 3-6 above.

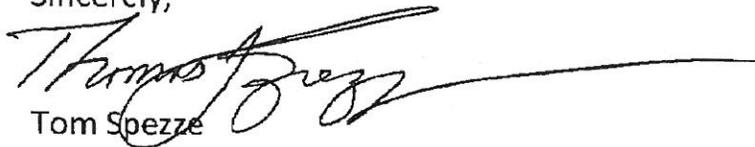
7. *Extends stewardship contracting to 20 years and increases the size limits for the use of a Categorical Exclusion above the need for NEPA.*
8. *Provides expedited approval procedures for projects carried out in response to hazardous fuels in close proximity to utility or telephone infrastructure, campgrounds, roadsides, heritage sites, recreation areas, schools and other infrastructure.*

RWEACT: Provisions 7 and 8 above, as related to the 2015 ACT, provide the absolute most realistic benefit for Forest-wide stewardship activities and projects to be implemented either pre or post-wildfire and in beetle-impacted forests and watersheds. Current authority provided to the Forest Service for protections of the critical infrastructure mentioned, is increased by nearly 3 times affectively. The application of a Categorical Exclusion to satisfy NEPA will certainly expedite and streamline forest management/stewardship and restoration project implementation permitting and timelines.

9. *Excludes Wilderness Areas and National Monuments and protects all valid and existing rights on applicable lands.*

As you know, public/private partnerships such as that formed between RWEACT and the Rio Grande National Forest are rare and rely on appropriate support at all levels to be successful in addressing the need for responsible forest management. Far more public money is spent fighting wildfires than that which can and should be invested in a pro-active approach to preventing the same by addressing under-managed, burn scared and beetle-infested forests. Thank you, Representative Tipton, for re-introducing this important tool to assist the Forest Service, RWEACT and all of the partners we represent. We look forward to hearing more as the bill progresses. Thank you!

Sincerely;



Tom Spezze
Executive Director
RWEACT