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March 20, 2013

Honorable Rob Bishop, Chairman
Honorable Raul Grijalva, Ranking Member
House Subcommittee on Public Lands and Environmental Regulation
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Bishop and Ranking Member Grijalva:

The State of Colorado and much of the western United States has been hit with severe drought conditions for several years. This, coupled with areas of extensive insect infestation and thick stands of forest overgrowth, has created an environment ripe for intense wild fire. In fact, the summer of 2012 saw one of the worst fire seasons in recent memory. Hinsdale County had the largest wildfire in its known history, the Little Sand Fire, which burned nearly 25,000 acres in Archuleta and Hinsdale Counties. We therefore support proactive measures to address forest health and mitigate the dangers unnaturally intense wild fires pose to human safety, property, infrastructure, wildlife habitat, and water quality. HR 818, Healthy Forest Management and Wildfire Prevention Act of 2013, contains provisions that we believe take much needed steps to address this issue.

Specifically, HR 818 openly identifies the issue at hand, and of great importance, vests actual authority to identify high risk areas and initiate mitigation measures to those most able to recognize the risk and with the most at stake should a wild fire erupt, that is, the respective states in coordination with county governments. HR 818 provides such authority to the Departments of Interior and Agriculture as well, but we stress the importance of arming our states and counties with the ability to address wild fire threats right in our back yards. While we appreciate any efforts to include our input in an advisory or cooperative role, we very much prefer the flexibility allowed to actually initiate mitigation measures.

HR 818 also recognizes the importance of cooperative mitigation efforts, in the spirit of which it provides for Good Neighbor authorities wherein the federal government may contract with the states to carry out forest health restoration activities. Again, as each respective state has much at stake in maintaining the health and viability of our public forests, this heavy local involvement garners our enthusiastic support. The stewardship contracting timeframe of up to 20 years allowed for in the bill is, in our view, a common sense measure fostering comprehensive, long term forest health projects.

We further appreciate the expedited procedures allowed for in HR 818 for emergency hazardous fuels reduction projects in identified high risk areas. While we emphatically support due diligence in preparation for fuels reduction projects, risks to property, infrastructure, irreplaceable historic and cultural sites, and life and limb dictate a sense of urgency in mitigating nearby fuel load risk. Nature waits for no one, and with common sense measures and caution, especially high risk areas can be protected in rapid fashion.

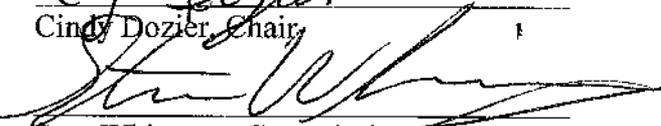
We fully understand that no entity can initiate mitigation measures autonomously and with impunity, which is why we support HR 818's express direction that all forest health projects comply with established environmental review procedures and current resource management plans. An element of consistency in addressing forest health is, in our opinion, good common sense, and receives our full support.

It is the nature of the western United States' climate to see cycles of ample precipitation and drought, and insect infestation will always be a part of the equation. We have known for a long period that the state of our forests' health was, in many areas, experiencing some deterioration and a lack of diversity in tree age. It has been known that this condition would lend itself to large, intensive and destructive wild fires, and it seems that these predictions have come to fruition recently. It is our view that actions to combat the dangers posed by wild fires ought not be reactive, but proactive. In that light, we view HR 818 as a valuable tool to address fire mitigation in the long term, and wish to express our full support of the bill.

The Hinsdale County Board of County Commissioners appreciates your efforts regarding this issue and for providing state and local government the tools and provisions necessary to ensure the protection of our public lands and forest health. We very much hope this input proves valuable in this process.

Sincerely,
Hinsdale Board of County Commissioners


Cindy Dozier, Chair


Stan Whithery, Commissioner


Susan Thompson, Commissioner