



## Rio Grande Water Conservation District

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*Protecting & Conserving San Luis Valley Water*

March 12, 2015

The Honorable Scott Tipton  
218 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Tipton:

The State of Colorado and much of the Western United States has been hit with severe drought conditions in recent years. This drought, coupled with areas of extensive insect infestation and thick stands of forest overgrowth, has created an environment that is suited for intense wildfires. As a result of the existing conditions, 2012 was one of the worst fire seasons in recent memory; therefore, we support proactive measures to address forest health in order to mitigate the dangers that intense wildfires pose to human safety, property, infrastructure, and wildlife habitat and water quality. The Healthy Forest Management Act of 2015 contains provisions that we believe take much needed steps to address these issues.

Specifically, the Healthy Forest Management Act of 2015 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 wildfire erupt, that is, the respective states in coordination with county governments. The bill 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 wildfire threats right in our backyards. 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.

The Healthy Forest Management Act of 2015 also recognizes the importance of cooperative mitigation efforts, 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 fervent 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.

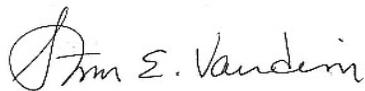
The Rio Grande Water Conservation District appreciates the expedited procedures for emergency hazardous fuels reduction projects in identified high risk areas. While we emphatically support due diligence in preparation for fuels reduction projects, risks to property, infrastructure, irreplaceable historic 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, 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 the bill'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 wildfires, and it seems that these predictions are coming to fruition. It is our view that actions to combat the dangers posed by wildfires ought not to be reactive but proactive. In this light, we view the Healthy Forest Management Act of 2015 as a valuable tool to address fire mitigation in the long-term, and wish to express our full support for the bill.

Thank you for 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 insight proves valuable to you and your colleagues.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Steven E. Vandiver". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned to the left of the typed name.

Steven Vandiver  
General Manager, Rio Grande Water Conservation District