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Apache County forest program cited as cure for 'disease' of growing wildfires

Friday, July 20, 2012¹_{SEP} By Samantha Bare¹_{SEP} Cronkite News

WASHINGTON – Apache County's forest-stewardship agreement with the U.S. Forest Service was held up at a congressional hearing Friday as a model for other governments trying to tame the growing problem of wildfires.

Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Flagstaff, said programs like Apache County's contract to help thin the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest should be part of a national strategy of forest management – not merely fire suppression – to combat catastrophic wildfires.

"Our forests have been mismanaged for a long time and it is way past due to change our strategy," Gosar told the House [Natural Resources Committee](#). "Although the need to suppress fires is never going to go away, we must shift priority towards proactive management."

He was testifying in support of [his bill](#) that would encourage federal officials to enter into timber-harvesting and grazing projects to reduce the amount of potential wildfire fuel on federal lands.

"When you have a drought, all the trees compete for that same drop of water," said David Cook, a member of the Arizona [Cattlemen's Association](#), who testified Friday. "That's why the forest needs to be thinned."

Gosar's was one of three bills aimed at dealing with forest mismanagement, drought and insect infestations – specifically the invasive bark beetle – that have contributed to a rise in catastrophic wildfires. Gosar said the five largest wildfires in Arizona history have come in the last 10 years.

He blamed the Forest Service for some of the problem, saying it took until June to award a contract that was supposed to be awarded in December for the Four Forests Restoration Initiative, among other issues.

"I see a lack of trust by the government with the counties and states. I absolutely see that," Gosar said. "And that's got to stop."

His said his bill would streamline the process for creating agreements like the one with Apache County, which began in May.

Apache County Natural Resources Coordinator Doyel Shamley said the program has worked well, and that his county's contract needs to be replicated throughout the country.

"The catastrophic wildfires are just a symptom of the disease" of forest mismanagement, Shamley said. "We need to get both back into control – the fire and the government."

Witnesses said another "imminent threat" to the nation's forests is infestation by invasive beetles. [Mary Wagner](#), associate chief of the Forest Service, said that 30 million federal acres are infested, stressing trees and making them more susceptible to burning. Beetles have infested 43 million acres total, she said.

The solution to restoring the health of national forests in the face of all those factors must come from a strategic plan, said Hank Kashdan of the National Association of [Forest Service Retirees](#).

"We all know that increasing budgets is not a fix," Kashdan said. "From a legislative approach, it has to be a focus on public partnerships to reduce the process and much greater recognition of the crisis."

Gosar said that's why his bill streamlines the process of restoring forests.

"Our ecosystem is suffocating," he said. "We simply need to make ecological restoration simpler."

But Rep. [Ed Markey](#), D-Mass., said bills by Gosar and Rep. [Scott Tipton](#),

R-Colo., do not place responsibility for catastrophic wildfires in the right place. He said climate change is responsible for the wildfires – and the droughts and record temperatures across the country – and that curbing human impact on the environment is the only way to mitigate the fires' impact. "If you think that the drought, heat wave and catastrophic wildfires are a coincidence, you're in deep denial," Markey said. "Once we get chemicals out of the climate, wildfires will go down."



From left, Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Flagstaff, Apache County Natural Resources Coordinator Doyel Shamley and David Cook of the Arizona Cattlemen's Association after a hearing in Washington on wildfire prevention bills. All said management is needed before fires break out.

Photo by Samantha Bare



Apache County Natural Resources Coordinator Doyel Shamley told the House Natural Resources Committee that forest stewardship agreements like the one his county has with the U.S. Forest Service are needed to keep wildfires under control.

Photo by Samantha Bare



Apache County crews began clearing brush, low-hanging limbs and small-diameter trees in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest in May, part of a program aimed at limiting wildfire outbreaks.

Photo by Veritas Research Consulting