



Statement for the Record from Laurel Harkness

Coalition Director

Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition

Submitted to the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
Hearing on “A Nation on Fire: Responding to the Increasing Wildfire Threat”
March 14, 2024

The Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC) would like to thank the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee for hosting a hearing on the findings and recommendations of the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission Report. RVCC is a group of rural community advocates, regional and national conservation organizations, business owners, federal and state land managers, and foundations focused on land stewardship and aligned economic development across the West.

Through our coalition, we support and advance policies that promote wildfire resilience using a collaborative, place-based approach to land restoration and stewardship. To accomplish this, we support the Commission’s recommendations for greater cross-boundary partnerships, collaboration, and funding (*see e.g.*, Recommendations 18, 24-26, 126). We echo Utah State Forester, Ms. Jamie Barnes, and her support for shared stewardship and interagency collaboration. An “all lands, all hands” approach to land management is an effective way to accomplish wildfire mitigation in the West. Furthermore, RVCC supports the Commission’s recommendations for the increased use of prescribed fire (*see e.g.*, Recommendations 10-16). During the hearing, we appreciated the support expressed by Ms. Barnes and others towards prescribed fire use so to better restore landscapes, mitigate wildfire risk, and manage the impact of smoke.

In addition, we agree with the Commission and Witnesses that better funding and coordination is needed between agencies during the post-fire recovery phase (*see e.g.*, Recommendations 1, 61-65). For example, the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) should better align its policies and procedures so post-disaster funding is more available for communities impacted by wildfire. It can take years for communities, especially rural ones, to rebuild after a wildfire. Greater federal coordination and funding access can help reduce rebuilding burdens and quicken recovery.

Lastly, we want to express strong support for the Recommendations and hearing testimony focused on uplifting the wildland fire workforce (*see e.g.*, Recommendations 84-103). Congressional support for the increased recruitment, retention, training, pay, wellbeing, and housing of our wildland firefighter will go

a long way towards protecting and uplifting our rural communities. A permanent pay fix for our federal wildland firefighters is urgent and necessary.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please don't hesitate to reach out if we can provide any further information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Laurel Harkness". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'L'.

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