Testimony of the

Honorable Montana State Senator (ret)

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On

Western Drought

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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony supporting good forest management, and its benefits for watershed supply and quality. Water availability is absolutely critical to Montana, its recreation, fisheries, agriculture, and forest health. From territorial days onward, Montanans say that “We drink whiskey – we fight for water!” Montana, being the only headwater state from whence water flows not only to the Pacific, and the Caribbean but also to the Artic is critically aware of the risks of drought.

Simply put, drought exacerbates life in general, and in particular complicates our efforts to manage our natural resources and produce our agricultural commodities. The flow of season-long water is of critical importance especially to Western States, due to the very nature of our landscapes. Congress first recognized this fact well over 100 years ago, which led directly to the establishment of the US Forest Service by the passage of the 1897 Organic Act, which I quote:

“No public forest reservation shall be established, except to improve and protect the forest within the reservation, or for the purpose of securing favorable conditions of water flows, and to furnish a continuous supply of timber for the use and necessities of citizens of the United States”

I would note that in establishing the US Forest Service, the first order of business was to secure

favorable water flows! I would strongly assert that the Agency has been remiss in this goal.

Throughout the western states, the result of the formulation of the Forest Service has been that the Agency controls and manages nearly all the headwater sheds, with the exception of some managed by the Park Service and others by the Bureau of Land Management. Management choices of headwater forests absolutely dictate the timing of water flow and its volume. Good forestry practices can insure season long water flows from snow and rain to the best that Mother Nature permits. Bad forest practices will insure early runoff, likely flooding, and little or no late summer water flows.

Vigorous headwater forested drainages truly act as a hydrologic “sponge” that hold snow under its tree cover for a slow, steady melt and runoff. Burnt watersheds flush melt fast, early and quick. Neither Missoula, MT nor St Louis, MO or New Orleans need fast, flood stage spring runoffs.

Drought seasons in the west are not new. They occur with frustrating regularity in the West, and ultimately they can become the proverbial “straw that breaks the camel’s back” concerning effective headwater forests due to lightning caused wildfires. Why? The answer is to mix in the various factors of older aged coniferous species, periodic outbreaks of various pathogenic agents like Mountain Pine Beetle and perceived longer and drier summers.

Recently I have seen that at least in Region One, the agency have proposed vegetative management projects in several headwater watersheds, yet the Purpose and Need statements that I have reviewed fail to consider water flows or flow timing as a focus. Targeting “a reduction of water sediment” simply isn’t adequate. Ask any Montana Livestock rancher: cows can tolerate muddy water, -- as long as they have water to drink at all! Maintenance of late summer and fall water flows is critical, to not only livestock, but fisheries ( and recreation ) as well.