

**TESTIMONY BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON CONSERVATION, ENERGY & FORESTRY**

**IMPACTS TO WILDLIFE POPULATIONS OF REDUCED
MANAGEMENT ON OUR NATIONAL FORESTS**

**GARY ZIMMER, CERTIFIED WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST®
COORDINATING WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST
RUFFED GROUSE SOCIETY
(rgszimm@gmail.com)**

MARCH 27, 2012

Mr. Chairman:

I am a lifelong resident of Northern Wisconsin and live within the boundaries of the Chequamegon/ Nicolet National Forest (NF). Since 2000, I have been a Wildlife Biologist for the Ruffed Grouse Society, a nonprofit wildlife conservation organization dedicated to improving the environment for ruffed grouse, American woodcock, and other forest wildlife. Eighteen years prior to that, I was a US Forest Service employee on the Chequamegon/Nicolet NF, the majority of those years as a District Wildlife Biologist. From both inside and outside the organization I have seen the impacts that a reduction in forest management on our National Forests has had on some wildlife populations.

Periodic forest disturbance is essential to maintain healthy forest ecosystems. Vibrant populations of a diverse array of forest wildlife are critical components of healthy forests. In order to maintain the full array of forest wildlife, a landscape must support the full array of forest habitats – forests of various types and various ages – very young, very old, and ages in between. **Today, wildlife dependent upon young forest habitats, sustained only through active forest management, are declining as a result of reductions in management of these habitats.**

Throughout time across North America, disturbance events have shaped the composition, structure, and distribution of wildlife habitats and, therefore, of wildlife populations. Changes in disturbance regimes beyond the range of natural variability due

to man's actions, or lack thereof, can affect the sustainability of wildlife populations on altered landscapes. Disturbance agents historically affecting vegetative communities included fire, wind, ice storms, disease, insect infestation and grazing. Since the early 20th Century, society has worked to minimize the effects of fire on the landscape through rigorous suppression in an effort to safeguard lives and property. Today, active forest management through the use of commercial timber harvest provide the only realistic opportunity to maintain the range of forest habitats needed to sustain wildlife diversity.

In February, 2007, the American Bird Conservancy classified early successional deciduous forest habitats (young forests) in the eastern United States as one of the nation's 20 most threatened bird habitats. Throughout the eastern United States today, young (1 to 20 years old) deciduous forest habitats have decreased by 33 % over the past several decades, while total forest land has increased by approximately 7 %. In the absence of fire, young forest habitats are sustained primarily through the natural succession of open lands to shrub-dominated fields or through the use of silvicultural treatments in existing forest stands. Even-age silvicultural systems (clearcut, seed tree, two-aged, shelterwood) are the most appropriate methods to create young forest habitats.

Acreage treated using even-aged silvicultural prescriptions on National Forests in the East has declined by 52 percent since 1995. Over the past 10 years, the Chequamegon/Nicolet NF, one of the more actively managed Forests in the Service's Eastern Region, has only met 28% of its Forest Plan goal for aspen management, a critical early successional forest species, and is currently over 17,000 acres behind in managing its aspen forest communities. Neither we nor the suite of wildlife species that utilize this important young forest habitat can tolerate a 72% drop in available habitat.

Thick, young forest habitat provides protective cover from predators for many wildlife species that are being negatively impacted by a decline in forest management. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' Wildlife Action Plan identifies 27 vertebrate Species of Greatest Conservation Need with declining or vulnerable populations associated with young forest and shrub-like habitat. Included in this list are the Kirtland's warbler, a Federal Endangered Species found primarily in regenerating jack pine forests less than 15 years old in Michigan and Wisconsin. There are currently an estimated 1,800 breeding pairs of Kirtland's warblers in the world – as compared to

2,260 breeding pairs of northern spotted owls in the U.S. alone. The Huron-Manistee NF in central Michigan supports approximately half of the global population of the Kirtland's warbler.

The New England cottontail rabbit is a candidate for protection under the federal Endangered Species Act. Once found across the Northeast, the New England cottontail rabbit has seen its range shrink by 86% since 1960 as the thicket habitats it requires become less and less abundant.

Another bird found only in young forests and shrub-like habitats is the golden-winged warbler, a bird petitioned for federal listing under the Endangered Species Act in 2010. It is estimated that 78% of the continent's golden-winged warbler population resides in the upper Midwest and is dependent on young aspen forests and other shrub-like habitats. The Great Lakes National Forests include some of the primary sources of golden-winged warbler populations in the entire United States and some of the last opportunities to halt the downward decline.

Over 40 species of songbirds in the Eastern United States are considered dependent on young forest habitat. More than half of the 187 species of neo-tropical migratory songbirds that breed in the Midwest use shrub or young-forest habitats to some degree during the breeding season. Breeding Bird Survey data document that bird species dependent upon shrub-dominated and young forest habitats are approximately twice as likely to be experiencing population declines in the Eastern United States as are birds that breed in mature forests.

Wildlife that rely upon young forest habitats also include the ruffed grouse, the state bird of Pennsylvania, and the American woodcock, two important game species pursued by over one million sportsmen and women each year in North America. These hunters have a significant economic impact, spending an estimated \$500 million in local communities.

Without a doubt, a diverse landscape that includes a wide array of forest ages and forest types is essential for the survival of a litany of species. National Forests and other public forestlands play an important role in the conservation of wildlife dependent on young forest habitats. Only through a balanced approach to forest stewardship, an

approach that recognizes the ecological necessity of periodic disturbance, today imparted primarily through commercial forest management, can the needs of our forest wildlife resources be adequately addressed.

Well-intended laws and regulations including the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) and National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) have guided the management of our National Forests for many decades but have been used by some to strangle the agency. It took the Chequamegon/Nicolet NF eight years and thousands of staff hours to complete their latest Forest Plan revision in 2004. As Forest Plan implementation began nearly every resource management project that involved timber harvests was appealed and litigated by a single environmental group. Legal challenges have resulted in continuing forest health issues, a failure to protect the forest from damaging agents and as noted earlier, a significant decline in young forest habitats. The National Forest system is the only publicly owned forest system in many Eastern states currently lacking third party certification. This is due in large part to legal challenges delaying the implementation of approved management activities for sustainable forestry. The cost for the Federal government to implement NEPA on National Forests exceeds well over \$300 million annually.

We must increase the use of active forest management on National Forests if we are to safeguard wildlife that requires young forest habitats. We must reduce the ability of groups or individuals to tie up habitat management activities for years and years at little cost to them, but at a very high cost to those that live and work in the vicinity of the National Forests and to the taxpayers of this great nation. **These forests provide some of the last opportunities to maintain essential young forest habitat as an important part of the biodiversity of our National Forests and meet the social and economic demands of the public.**

Thank you for your time.